

CAITHNESS CHAMBER
RALLY FOR
GROWTH

ELECTION MANIFESTO 2024



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CHAMBER *of*
COMMERCE

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Caithness Chamber of Commerce UK Election Manifesto 2024

Caithness Chamber of Commerce calls on the next UK Government to fully recognise the critical importance of the North Highlands, given its significant national assets.

Ahead of the General Election taking place on Thursday 4 July 2024, Caithness Chamber of Commerce highlights key priorities it believes the region's next MP and UK Government must tackle.

Whoever forms the next UK Government must partner with business to tackle the challenges and grow the economy. The country succeeds when business succeeds. We are asking the next UK Government to work closely with the business community to help deliver the most pro-growth policies to turbo-charge investment, innovation and job creation.

The economy ranks among the top three issues for UK voters. As a chamber network, the companies we represent are pivotal in driving economic growth and employing millions of people. Our members and employees demand confidence in the Government's support for businesses.

The North Highland region is fundamental to the nation's transition to renewable power and is at the cusp of transformational developments and opportunities. National assets such as Space, Offshore Wind and significant electricity transmission infrastructure are being developed and planned in our region and off our shores.

It is imperative that the next UK Government acknowledges the unique needs of the North

Highlands, considering the significant national assets it houses.

A comprehensive action plan by the new UK ministers is necessary to foster rural employment, provide suitable housing and healthcare, enhance transport connectivity, and support communities. It is crucial to ensure true progress and levelling up in collaboration with businesses, communities, and stakeholders. Whilst some of these are devolved issues, we believe UK Government still has a duty and responsibility given this region's national importance in the UK's transition to net zero.

Political parties and both the UK and Scottish Governments must urgently set aside their differences and prioritise delivering for the people, rather than focusing on party politics. This novel approach is desperately needed to realise significant opportunities for empowering and transforming communities like the North Highlands, ensuring they are not left behind.

Caithness Chamber is part of Scottish Chambers of Commerce Network sits at the heart of local business communities, representing over 12,500 businesses in Scotland, and provides a gateway to the International Chambers of Commerce Network.





A MIXED ENERGY ECONOMY

Caithness Chamber strongly advocates for a mixed energy economy. As we move towards a "Just Transition" as a nation, our region's assets, including a highly skilled workforce, natural resources, and reputation for excellence, will be essential in Scotland's transition to renewable energy. However, meeting the upcoming developments will require careful planning and coordination.

Developments & Transmission Capacity

Transparency regarding energy developments and transmission capacity is essential. Communities should not be subjected to endless development schemes without a clear plan and understanding of the impact. UK Government must involve and respect the voice of these communities in decisions that affect their livelihoods and businesses.

Transformational projects in our region must play a crucial role in driving investment in our future skills, economy, and infrastructure. A "just transition" will not be realised without our communities seeing tangible benefits from the developmental burdens imposed upon them, therefore the needs of rural communities must be at the forefront of government decision-making. Government policy and decisions made in Holyrood or Westminster must be cognisant of the impact on the rural communities they serve.



Planning and Consenting

Planning and consenting processes for responsible renewable energy developments need to be expedited to meet the nation's net zero targets and allow communities and businesses to realise opportunities. Delays in these processes have far-reaching impacts, not only affecting developers but the region as a whole, putting pressure on rural communities dealing with the significant needs of such developments.

Energy Costs

Residents and businesses in the North Highlands currently bear some of the highest standing charges for electricity in the UK. This is based on historical costs of power distribution. These national assets of generation and transmission infrastructure will be based here. The new UK Government should legislate to provide energy discounts for businesses and communities housing these assets.

Nuclear

Scotland has a rich history of nuclear research and electricity generation. As a Chamber, we believe that nuclear energy has a place in Scotland's energy mix.

Nuclear power stations and the nuclear engineering supply chain have provided significant benefits to the people of Scotland, particularly in the North Highlands. The employment opportunities at Dounreay are crucial to the region, supported by a network of highly skilled and sophisticated local supply chain businesses.

The UK Government must unequivocally support our region to balance and develop the new opportunities ahead for the maximum benefit of our region and ensure these opportunities complement rather than compete with our existing sectors.

Oil and Gas

The UK Government should support the rapid upskilling of the workforce for green jobs, while also acknowledging the transferable skills that are prevalent in the oil and gas industry. It is crucial to recognise the ongoing significance and value that UK oil and gas will hold for Scotland's energy mix over the next 20-25 years.

Creating a detailed just transition plan to net zero for the oil and gas sector is crucial. This plan should aim to protect jobs and investment, as well as ensure energy security as we transition to new sources of energy.

To instil confidence and unlock investment in the oil and gas sector, the UK Government should commit to maintaining investment allowances and future exploration. Additionally, the consideration of ending the Windfall Tax should be taken into account.





TRANSPORT & CONNECTIVITY

Life-line transport and connectivity are a matter of extreme importance to those of us living and working in the North Highlands. Transport infrastructure in the North Highlands must be fit for purpose.

Transportation and connectivity have been identified among the most important factors in decreasing the risk of depopulation and in turn the sustainability of our region and a vital component to the region's economic development.

With the location of national assets in the region, we call on UK Government to work with the Scottish Government to ensure critical investment in transport infrastructure so that businesses, investors, and communities across the region have access to the connectivity they require:

Air Services

To acknowledge the critical importance of future-proofing lifeline air connectivity for remote and rural communities, and to advocate for the sustained and supported development of air services in the North Highlands.

Trunk Road

To advocate and back our calls to keep the promises made to deliver the critical upgrades required for the vital A9 trunk road



SKILLS

The new UK Government needs to implement new policies and provide support to help businesses recruit and train sufficient staff. This not only impacts private sector projects but also major public sector funded projects:

Employers need greater incentives to recruit apprentices as funded training places decrease and business costs rise. We must nurture and inspire our homegrown talent and provide them with the skills needed for the future of our region, while also strengthening a sustainable working-age population.

Affirming support for Developing the Young Workforce to ensure that young people understand what our future economy will look like and are well-placed to take the opportunities that will be available to them in the North Highlands.

Ensuring universities such as the University of the Highlands & Islands have adequate resources to meet the demand for current and future skills and developments.



IMMIGRATION

The UK's immigration strategy must prioritise people and talent, the new UK Government must:

Develop a skilled migration strategy to attract international talent, including tailoring for Scotland's skills and working population needs.

Recognise the value of international students and retain the post-study visa ensuring the UK is competitive with global higher education hubs.



VAT

The new UK Government must stimulate business growth by reducing the VAT rate for the hospitality, leisure, and tourism sectors. This will increase spending, drive demand, support footfall in towns and support rural economies, particularly those in the North Highland region with heavy reliance on tourism.

It must also commit not to introduce any new taxes or levies on businesses throughout the lifetime of the next parliament.





HEALTH CARE

Immediate action is required to address the critical shortcomings in our local healthcare services. Although health services are devolved, the provision of adequate local healthcare in the North Highlands is severely impacting our community. Residents are forced to travel long distances for basic medical care, resulting in significant financial burdens and a factor in fuelling depopulation. Radical reform to healthcare is required to maintain the health and well-being of our community and ensure the sustainability of our local population.

The new MP and UK Government must advocate for the Scottish Government to intervene and enhance local healthcare services and:

Protect our local hospitals from further cuts and ensure they receive the necessary support and funding. Halt the centralisation of essential services.

Reverse the downgrade of our maternity unit to provide comprehensive care for expectant mothers locally.

Reduce the number of Caithness residents travelling over 100 miles for brief appointments by improving local healthcare provision.



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Naver Business Centre, Naver House, Naver Road, Thurso, Caithness KW14 7QA
T: 01847 890076 E: info@caithnesschamber.com W: www.caithnesschamber.com